



Paulo Freire, 1921 - 1997

Not Activism, Not Blah

Action / Reflection = word = work = praxis

Sacrifice of action = verbalism

Sacrifice of reflection = activism

What separates humanist philosophy from other kinds of philosophy is that we humanists see life as an interaction between the human Subject and the Objective universe. Others either believe in pure (subjective) will, or in pure (objective) fate.

This humanist philosophy is not a compromise or an arbitrary “middle way”. Instead, it represents a real dialectical unity-and-struggle-of-opposites.

The human Subject defines the universe, and the universe contains the human Subject.

In Chapter 3 of the Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Freire manages to express all of this with great power, and then to develop it into an educational “praxis” (theory-and-practice), which is dialogue.

Here are the first few paragraphs:

Verbalism without action is idle chatter

“As we attempt to analyze dialogue as a human phenomenon, we discover something which is the essence of dialogue itself: the word. But the word is more than just an instrument which makes dialogue possible; accordingly, we must seek its constitutive elements. Within the word we find two dimensions, reflection and action, in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed - even in part - the other immediately suffers. There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis. Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world.

“An unauthentic word, one which is unable to transform reality, results when dichotomy is imposed upon its constitutive elements. When a word is deprived of its dimension of action, reflection automatically suffers as well; and the word is changed into idle chatter, into verbalism, into an alienated and alienating “blah.” It becomes an empty word, one which cannot denounce the world, for denunciation is impossible without a commitment to transform, and there is no transformation without action.”

Activism is action for action’s sake, and it makes dialogue

impossible

“On the other hand, if action is emphasized exclusively to the detriment of reflection, the word is converted into activism. The latter - action for action's sake - negates the true praxis and makes dialogue impossible. Either dichotomy, by creating unauthentic forms of existence, creates also unauthentic forms of thought which reinforce the original dichotomy.

“Human existence cannot be silent nor can it be nourished by false words, but only by true words, with which men and women transform the world. To exist humanly is to name the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new naming. Human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection.

“But while to say the true word - which is work, which is praxis - is to transform the world, saying that word is not the privilege of some few persons, but the right of everyone. Consequently no one can say a true word alone - nor can she say it for another, in a prescriptive act which robs others of their words.”

- The above is to introduce the original reading-text: [Pedagogy of The Oppressed, Chapter 3, 1970, Freire.](#)
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